

Last month we focused on home and mothers, often considered the softer and caring member of the parental group that helped to make us who we are. This month, since it includes Father's Day in the States, I thought I might offer some ideas related to the role of the other side of the equation that is needed to help a child develop and grow into the mature being that each of us becomes, the authority figure. In childhood, there is a dynamic balance that is sought between encouragement and accountability. One without the other can impede and limit emotional intelligence, personal responsibility, self-awareness, and self-confidence. The right father figure can help provide that balance.

The **father** role typically includes elements such as disciplinarian, rule setter and enforcer, the provider of resources and structure, the sculptor of a foundation for the future, and serving as a strong authority figure in a family. They are often deemed to be the person with wisdom, scientific, sports, and financial awareness. These figures tend to be seen as the final arbitrators of what is possible, what is good or bad, and what is allowed. Yet, fathers are also frequently the people who teach us how to play certain games, how to take risks, how to take off the training wheels, how to jump off the edge of the pool, and how to swing the bat or throw the ball. Admittedly, in my own family my mother was very active in these roles as a Phys Ed teacher, avid birder, plant identifier, crafts person, skill judge, sports player, and fan.

So what might happen when the person who has always been the AUTHORITY in a family begins to experience the changes that come with dementia? What if that person's word was law, and yet now the words are not making much sense or are the opposite of what had always been said? What if that person began to seek support and ask questions that indicated s/he could no longer think things through, make decisions, fill the day, and/or run the business? Whether the person is young or old, there is a void and conflict and frustration for all if we don't quickly realize things are changing and begin to reconsider how best to help the person living with dementia and the care partner, family, friends, and surrounding community.

So let's back up and consider: What or who is an authority figure in our lives? What purpose do they serve? How do we behave around that person? What role do they fulfill for us? How many of them are there in our life? Can anyone or anything take their place?

One definition indicates that an authority figure is a person whose real or apparent authority over others inspires or demands obedience and emulation: Parents, teachers, and police officers are traditional authority figures for children.

So for many, an authority figure has the power to make a difference in your life, to provide direction, guidance, advice, reward or punishment, and establish rules and regulations. For most of us there are a variety of people or positions that operate in this fashion over our lifetime. There are governmental authorities, financial authorities, spiritual authorities, medical authorities, fashion and behavior authorities, familial authorities, as well as academic and professional authorities. Some are generationally driven and others are culturally oriented. Dear Abby and Erma Bombeck combined with Paul Harvey represent some well-known popular figures who have helped us look at ourselves and our behaviors and consider options, beliefs, and behaviors that have changed over time to perhaps be more inclusive or expand on our personal perspective. Using the external authority figures in our life, we gradually internalize our authority system. As we live life, our central and peripheral neurological systems mature, and our brains develop expertise and wisdom over time. What is good or bad? What works the way I want and like it to, and what was dangerous or not helpful to me and mine. This continues until our pre-frontal cortex becomes our internal authority figure as we learn to use that section as an internal monitor, over-ride control, and guide. Through this system, we can control impulses, think through data to reach reasonable, logical, and rational conclusions, and consider options and alternatives. We also begin to make value driven choices for initiating action, using an accurate sequence, and finishing what we start so that we can transition to another project. Most importantly, we are better able to see things from another person's perspective and incorporate that awareness and knowledge in our relationships and interactions with them to minimize harm and optimize beneficial outcomes for all concerned.

What this means, ultimately, is that for most of us over the course of our lifetime we release our parents, our faith-based leaders, our governmental officials, and our judicial leaders from the responsibility of telling us exactly how to do what we need to do in order to believe we are doing it well and right. WE assume more and more responsibility for our own actions and behaviors, based on their initial teachings and input, but guided by our own life experiences. The fit between what we were originally taught and shown as being **best** by these various authority figures and how it resonates and seems **right** to us will in large part determine our continued willingness and interest in having these figures in our life for support and guidance that matches what we **feel and think** is best. We may be less likely in viewing someone as an authority figure if: 1) There is a history of conflict and inconsistency between what they said we should do and what we observed them doing or 2) the results of following their commands led to less than optimal results. If there are changes in ability to use the skills found in the pre-frontal cortex, then those in the immediate area and the surrounding world will begin to feel and sense the alteration. Here is a brief listing of the key executive center skills that can be damaged or impacted by various forms of dementia, as well as other health conditions, sleep deprivation, and stress:

- Control emotional reactions – do what is right and valued versus what is immediately desired or *needed for relief* of distress or protection of status quo
- Take in data and reach reasonable, logical, and rational conclusions based on that information and life-long values and beliefs on what is *right and fair*

- Make decisions that weigh the pros and cons of up to five or even eight alternatives and determine which serves best the values and needs of the group/people most valued
- Plan and then begin to act on those decisions with purpose, sequence, and consistency – complete what was determined to be needed and then move on to other things
- Reflect on personal skills and abilities compared to the demands of the situation and determine whether help is needed to achieve what is to be done or if the person is capable of acting independently and safely to complete the tasks
- Consider the other people involved, their perspectives and needs, and develop strategies that take those needs and desires into consideration; either by modifying the plan and action or by accurately acknowledging opposition and having reasonable explanations for the decisions that have been made as well as the right to make them for another

Nowhere are these changes more hurtful and potentially harmful than in the world of dementia. If I have always been the boss, then having a child, spouse, or friend try to tell me what to do or how to do it will frequently result in meltdowns, arguments, and absolute refusals to consider options. When I have always followed a certain set of guidelines in my life and I start to do unusual or unexpected things, nothing is more surprising to those around me and may cause them to over-react or under-react in their efforts to get me to be the *me* they have always known. Additionally, external authority figures may suddenly seem like enemies and persecutors as they seem to be limiting my rights without cause, from my perspective. In some cases it may actually be true that poorly trained or ill-informed authority figures use extreme or over-reaching statements or actions to try to control what is seen as dangerous or problematic behavior, only to aggravate the situation and person further due to the sense of frustration, anger, or fear that they engender.

In these cases typically, one of three options might be considered:

1. Look around and find people who the individual does regard as authority figures and seek out their help and support when tough choices, changes, or new ways of doing things must be considered. Meet with and talk through what is happening and what is creating risk, challenge, danger, and emotional distress for those involved. After an overall plan is developed, have the authority figure broach the subject with the person to see where that person is in their abilities and comprehension without triggering strong emotional reactions *or* with the skills to deal with those emotions, should they arise. That person helps the person consider limited numbers of possibilities and get advice or help from a very select and trained group of supporters. Only then would the duo share with and have the rest of the team (spouse and kids, the faith community, the business, the staff) be informed of the leader's decision and plan, and together they go along with the choice that has been made. If these authority figures are not familiar with dementia and how to support and help someone struggling with

the changing abilities and limitations, then it is critical for them to become knowledgeable and skilled, if they are going to be of active assistance.

2. Determine who among the possible partners can best serve as the individual's surrogate and other self. Then figure out who will be the *bad guy*, the person who will be bearing the bad news, setting up the need for change, offering two possibilities when neither option is appealing. This is a skillful dance that the three parties will be working through. The person living with dementia is supported by someone who is able to see their perspective, express their sense of unfairness, anger, frustration, or fear. This will provide the person living with dementia the much needed sense of being somewhat in control and making choices, within a frame that provides for a greater safety net not only for that person but all those around.
3. If the person recognizes no other person as an authority figure, then the possibilities for successful navigation of changes and need for modifications of living situations, spiritual and social involvement, financial management, transportation options, and life engagement have just been greatly limited. While it is possible to make it through the condition without a need for setting limits and changing opportunities and support structures and personnel, it is rare for it to go smoothly. This means it may require high risk situations and injuries or accidents to take place before the person is *forced* to accede to the demands of those around them who are all too aware of the impairments that make life as it was previously lived impossible and dangerous, for not only that person but others in the community or family. The partner who is attempting to provide support and help will benefit greatly from their own support and processing team. If there is not a previously developed one, then forming one will become a lifeline to surviving and possibly becoming skillful in advocating for and limiting what damage is done. It is not a job for the faint-hearted. There will be pain and mistakes will be made as the changing roles and responsibilities combine with the desire to be in control and assert authority are determined and shifted.

So, I titled the article Fathers, Foundations, and Authority Figures. June is an excellent month to:

- Reflect on our own history of fathers, grandfathers, adopted father figures, women who served in a father's role or position in our lives AND to realize we have those emotional histories and stories inside of us, so that when we are coping with someone who is looking like, sounding like, acting like, even smelling like those people, we might be tempted to react rather than respond. We might indeed get lost in our own stuff, rather than offer the support and advocacy that would serve all of us better.
- Celebrate those in our lives who have provided the foundations that make us who and how we are, whether they live with dementia, did live through dementia, or are supporting others who are living with dementia.

- Take a little time to consider two aspects of authority figures – first, who are my authority figures for my values, beliefs, and aspects of my life and how do I behave and act around them. Second, who are the authority figures of the person or people I am trying to support and help? If I am not one, who is, and what do they know, believe, and do about dementia?

For all three, if I don't take time to consider both myself and those I am seeking to help, how might differences or *not* knowing, or not having what is needed contribute to what is happening or not happening? If I don't know, how can I figure it out, be curious about it? Could authority and foundations, and father figures be influencing how we are both experiencing our time together and our relationship and life? What can I choose to change for a better outcome? What can I select to support to find the moments of joy and respect that are still possible?

Here is a quote from William Gladstone, related to building a foundation, which mirrors my belief about how our willingness to promote the health and well-being of others will ultimately serve us all well. He wrote:

“There should be a sympathy with freedom, a desire to give it scope, founded not upon visionary ideas, but upon the long experience of many generations within the shores of this happy isle, that in freedom you lay the firmest foundations both of loyalty and order.”

William E. Gladstone